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ABSTRACT

The political interests and educational orientations that adult education advocates who work on behalf of welfare recipients have about welfare-to-work programs influence the strategies they use to advance poor women's education. Adult Basic Education (ABE) providers face many conflicts as they engage in implementing programs under welfare reform, including an emphasis on job preparation versus adult education for individual development or for social change, and the question of whether programs should be learner-focused or agency-focused. In order to increase understanding of how advocates for women's education in San Francisco dealt with these kinds of conflicts, approximately 7 female representatives from various constituencies, as well as 3 female welfare recipients, were interviewed. A feminist methodology of qualitative inquiry was used to analyze the results. The advocacy strategies of the advocacy community varied. An ABE in-take counselor who focused on women as learners was not interested in the desires of the Department of Human Services (DHS), while a workforce education administrator who worked cooperatively with DHS to establish vocational training for women was interested. All of the advocates worked around limitations of welfare policy to help clients, but differing justifications and actions highlight power issues. Further research into how power is constructed by advocates and how it might be best used to benefit welfare mothers with low skills would be helpful. (Contains 8 references.) (MO)

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Collage of Welfare-to-Work Perspectives: Views Inside and Outside the System

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Abstract: The political interests and educational orientations advocates have about welfare-to-work influence the strategies they use to advance poor women's education.

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Introduction

Welfare reform not only changes "welfare as we know it" and attempts to regulate the moral behavior of poor women through mandates for "self sufficiency" but challenges many who are committed to social justice or share a concern and sense of responsibility for the poor of this country. Some of these others are women and men working in adult education agencies such as community colleges, universities, local community organizations, and non-profit service and advocacy centers, in other words, the educational providers who are implementing a piece of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Dealing with issues of unequal power and control leads them to strategic actions, meanings, and attitudes.

Welfare-to-work programs are a key implementation strategy designed to prepare recipients for employment. These programs, most often characterized by condensed, short term training, have been hotly contested by those who see the need for combined vocational training and basic skill development and by those who battle for postsecondary education options. These are challenges to the "work first" emphasis which mandates self sufficiency within a limited time period and calls for quick-fix remedies to job skill development. These challenges have spotlighted the links between education, economy and living wage work igniting continuing debate, research investigations, reauthorization briefings, trial and error programming, and advocacy coalitions. Through their efforts, educational advocates are struggling over control for the meaning and definition of "education for work".

Adult education advocates, however, are not of a single mind representative of a certain political or ideological stance. There is a heterogeneous configuration of elements among and within advocate positions. As a result, those who work on behalf of welfare recipients may, in fact, be working at cross purposes. Presented here is a collage of welfare-to-work perspectives which juxtaposes contradictory and conflicting positions of education advocates in San Francisco providing a complex rendering of implementation practices based on diverse social justice and educational priorities and frames of reference. I begin by discussing some of the issues and dilemmas related to welfare-to-work programs, then identify the advocacy strategies providers use for advocating women's education, followed by a listing of additional areas where intersections and divergence exist. This project suggests some research questions for future investigation related to providing adult education services to welfare recipients.

Implementation of social policy

Social policy implementation is never uniform, direct or thorough. Rather implementations are saturated with vested interests, ideologies (residual, emergent, and dominant, (Ball, 1990)), and beliefs which often challenge the state's "administrative authority" to allocate values. Sparks (1999) identifies critical issues and dilemmas that ABE providers must face as they engage in implementing

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programs under welfare reform. There are struggles over differences in ideologies between welfare reform's emphasis on job preparation versus the contested and contradictory ideologies of adult education for individual development or for social change; there are struggles over educational program goals and purposes causing major conflicts between welfare reform proponents and ABE practitioners; and there are ethical struggles silencing recipient voices as well as ABE instructor voices where a politics of control is in play. At the local level Folkman & Rai (1999) contend that practitioners must negotiate tradeoffs "striking a balance between multiple challenges" (p. 79) of being learner-focused and agency-focused with the goal of creating a "micro safety net" for the learner/recipient. For those involved with welfare-to-work programming "the community-based organization must learn to function within a network of stakeholders that includes not only learners, volunteers, and financial contributors but also businesses as consumers and other program providers as collaborating partners" (p. 82).

Advocates are also dealing with women's rights. Welfare reform is interpreted by feminists as an aggressive affront to women's economic, social, cultural, and political rights (Mink, 1998). Collins and Goldberg (1999) contend that welfare reform has reverted to 19th century poor law which created a separate caste and a separate system of law. Discriminatory effects on women include educational stratification and academic tracking into low skill jobs and the subsequent loss of vocational choice, relegation to low wage work which keeps women poor and exploited, and a demeaning status to women's unpaid caregiving role. Advocates call for a more meaningful experience for women's labor market participation beyond low pay, temporary, part time, low skill jobs offered through welfare reform and many welfare-to-work programs.

Tensions clearly exist for advocates. Policy and its implementation cannot be divorced from interests, conflict, domination or from justice (Ball, 1990). Welfare reform policy is politically powerful and relies on coercive mechanisms for successful implementation. The Department of Human Services' (DHS) administrative authority is being used to oversee implementation. Yet, at the local level agencies can be influential in implementation. For example, changes were made in San Francisco's welfare reform practices through coalition efforts. Although California opposed including study time for recipients engaged in education, San Francisco advocates were able to get this passed into law. Advocates were also able to get screening for learning disabilities included in client assessment (E. Stotland, personal communication, July 14, 2000). Those who become advocates for women's education, having confronted the realities of their local communities, devise proactive strategies to deal with those realities. In order to understand how this was happening in San Francisco I talked with several adult education advocates.

Research Design

I used a feminist methodology (Reinharz, 1989) of qualitative inquiry which attends to women's issues within patriarchal western societies and frames questions that move beyond socially accepted responses to expose contradictions, complexities, the social constructions of people's lives, and unarticulated experiences. I was interested in identifying stakeholder's involvement in welfare-to-work programs and their perceptions of the programs.

I used a purposeful sampling strategy to obtain various perspectives. Individual and small group in-depth interviews were held over a period of three weeks in San Francisco, July 2000. Interviews were transcribed and coded, extensive field notes were taken and analytical and theoretical memos written up. Secondary sources of data included program materials including curricula from education and training agencies and community newspapers. The analytic strategy I

used was a constant comparative method; as I gathered data I tried to fit it into what I already knew. Conversely, the method alerted me to areas which needed fleshing out and/or verification. This iterative process enabled me to see what kinds of questions needed to be answered at any particular moment.

Representatives from various constituencies were interviewed including an administrator of Workforce Education for San Francisco's community college system, two Department of Human Services (DHS) outreach workers, a job placement director at a community-based job-training program, an Adult Learning Resource Center in-take counselor at a community college site, a legal aid attorney, the coordinator for a labor organizing agency, and three welfare recipients. All participants interviewed were women. Additionally, I attended the quarterly meeting of the CalWORKS Oversight Committee, coordinated by DHS, where representatives from twenty community-based organizations attended.

Like many cities San Francisco is a city of extremes and contradictions with its rich technology based economy and the subsequent infiltration of dot.com companies into various working class ethnic neighborhoods, to its inner city where few venture at night and those who do may easily encounter drug dealing and use on the streets. The majority of welfare recipients in San Francisco are families headed by young mothers who lack a high school diploma and have low academic skill levels. According to a 1997 California Department of Social Services report (cited in Sheared, McCabe, & Umeki, 2000) 30% of the families with children under 18 living in downtown San Francisco, within the areas of the Mission, Civic Center, and South of Market, fall below the poverty level.

Advocacy Strategies

San Francisco has a strong advocacy community working on behalf of its poor and the multiple interests of welfare recipients dealing with such issues as housing, childcare, healthcare, transportation, safety, employment, education, and human rights. It is easy to imagine how the issues within these particular areas of social life differ yet are intertwined and inseparable and how advocates involved with them might focus their efforts. Advocates of women's education are no less diverse than advocates for fair housing or children's rights. We can see this by examining the advocacy strategies used by the various stakeholders. Several adult education orientations and interests are represented: adult literacy, vocational training, community development, labor, policy, and law as well as the interests of family represented most directly by the welfare mothers. I found that the educational orientations that advocates espoused influenced the divergent advocacy strategies each used.

To do justice to explicating the complexity, contradictions, and diversity of interests requires a more extensive discussion then is possible here. Yet, even a simplified look at some of the varying advocacy strategies, which challenge the constraints of welfare policy while adhering to espoused values of practice, is useful in distinguishing the complex configuration of worldviews, politics, and practice theories. These implementation responses can be thought of as ways to contend with the system through consultation, negotiation, or contestation in order to both protect the rights of welfare mothers and address recipients' economic needs through education and training.

Community College. As the central institutional provider of welfare-to-work in San Francisco the community college system's Workforce Education Department redesigned two year degree programs to comply with the guidelines for funding from DHS and the constraints of time limits for recipients. They have designed short term programs ranging from 3 to 18 months, have embedded

vocationally related basic skills into them, track student attendance, and have obtained program approval from DHS. These "CalWORKS approved" programs are diverse and some low skill career ladders have been created, for example, in the healthcare and computer fields.

The community college maintains working relationships with DHS by providing office space for their workers within the administrative structure. First, "by working with DHS we have been able to get programs approved for people. In 1997 there were 2500 welfare clients enrolled in programs at City College of San Francisco. Today there are 500 of a potential 700, this is approximately 10% of the total case load of 8500. Of the 500, 44 [people] are enrolled in AA degree programs. The remaining 456 are vocational certificate people" (administrator). The administrator voiced her concern about providing some degree of basic skills for low skill recipients so they can succeed in their vocational training and find decent living wage work. Nevertheless, "most people are only finding temporary work or work that is barely above minimum wage without a chance for advancement" (administrator) even though basic skills are embedded in the "fast track programs". Second, the community college has been able to convince DHS that they should provide training for the caseworkers. "This has had some impact on recipient placement since DHS workers are getting first hand experience in postsecondary classes. Since so many caseworkers are without college they often don't see benefits of further education nor understand the problems students have getting an education" (administrator). This administrator's approach is one of working inside the system with the DHS outreach workers.

Community Development. The community-based job-training program located in the Mission community operates under "the belief that everyone deserves the chance to control their own economic future and that of their family". The agency slogan is "In partnership with the community" (agency brochure). They are involved in community development and have maintained a stable presence for over 30 years. This commitment to the community is being challenged by the dot.com companies moving into this neighborhood. The agency is being asked to recruit and train community residents for the companies thus helping residents and welfare recipients find good paying jobs; these are, however, the same companies that are dislocating many poor people in this neighborhood. The specialist I talked with could not say how this would play out since community residents were protesting the agency's involvement with the dot.coms.

The training program most recipients are enrolled in is the certified nursing assistant (CNA) program. The agency is also used by DHS for job skills training and employment placement. The agency's history of working in the community has created a family atmosphere and the specialist said some of the counselors think they know what is best for clients. "she told me of a time when CalWORKS clients were being enrolled by agency counselors into job training even though recipient contracts with DHS did not authorize these activities. Now the relationship with DHS is strained and the agency is seeing fewer referrals as well as a cut in its funding" (field notes). This particular advocacy strategy backfired although intentions were consistent with the agency's goals. Both this example and the dot.com controversy raise questions about paternalism and power.

The specialist also cited job placement and retention as a problem for the recipients after they completed the CNA training. "We get calls from employers telling us the women being placed don't have the basic skills needed by the employers" (job placement specialist). One response has been to begin basic skill assessment of welfare recipients as well as creating an advanced ESL/work readiness program which counts toward work activities. "They recognize a need for an ABE component and are trying to develop an "English-based ABE" program" (field notes).

Adult Basic Education. According to the ABE intake counselor "the students are my first priority". She explained, "you know, they [DHS] want to know how long it will take a person they refer to us; when the person will get the GED and we can't do that. We don't know for sure. The lower the skill level of the person the longer it will take. It depends on so many things and the more hours a person can come and the higher their reading level the quicker they will be able to finish the GED. I tell them they can help by giving the client transportation for the bus and childcare so they can attend more hours. That would help. I don't like the way they pressure clients. We don't see eye to eye. Our focus is on the student, what the student needs, not what the agency wants" (intake counselor). Consistent with her concern for the students she said, "our commitment is to the client. We focus on their needs. We only release information if the student signs a release of information form. Since we are not keeping track of attendance hours for government programs we advocate attending the program according to their [the students] availability and educational needs. It's up to them to keep the commitment with their caseworkers" (in-take counselor).

This consistency was further dramatized as I watched her with the six or seven students who came into the center while I was there. Her attitude was open and friendly as she assisted several individuals in taking a placement test for services and explained in detail the GED preparation program to people who called on the phone.

Legal Aid & Policy. Legal aid protects and defends women's rights under welfare reform in a case by case situation. As an outside advocacy agency the attorney I interviewed had a perspective of "helping to keep the system accountable and raising questions". California is one of thirteen states that allows two years of education under welfare reform although a minority of recipients are actually able to enroll in programs. In our first meeting several months prior to this study we discussed the limited access women were having to educational programs, especially those at the lower end of the education ladder.

At the time of the interviews the attorney was representing a woman with learning disabilities. "She mentioned the high number of learning disabled, well documented in the research, who are losing out. She filed a grievance for this woman and petitioned for an extension of the two year time limit so she could get more time in her vocational program. The county committee who works with the woman agreed but the state department disapproved of the request" (field notes). The attorney mentioned the department (DHS) "is just now working on a protocol to identify learning disabilities. Up to this point [July, 2000] women were self identified" (field notes).

As she pointed out to me, "by the time a woman makes it to me she already knows she has some rights. I worry about all those who never make it to an advocacy center" (interview notes). While it might be ideal to work towards self advocacy with recipients, advocates like this attorney are stepping in and working the system.

Labor Interests. A different set of strategies is used by another outside agency. The workers' rights advocate of the labor organizing agency has at least two strategic concerns. Not only is she working for women's rights to education and helping them get into programs but her strategy includes "build[ing] capacity for recipients to fight on their own behalf"(agency advocate) through empowerment training. "Political education" sessions are held twice a month and include such technical skills as public speaking and building welfare rights case arguments as well as "analysis of the interconnections between class, patriarchy and white supremacy" (agency advocate). They use a popular education model and have their office in the midst of the downtown, low income neighborhood they serve. Educational priorities center strategies around reframing debates about

welfare-to-work to focus instead on the labor rights of welfare recipients as workers who want access to equal pay and living wage jobs.

Discussion and Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

The advocacy strategies used are particularistic to the specific individuals interviewed, their political interests, and educational orientations. Because the ABE in-take counselor's educational orientation focuses on the women as learners not recipients of welfare, she is not concerned about the wants of DHS nor does the center "track" attendance for them. The Workforce Education administrator's strategy is to work cooperatively with DHS in order to establish vocational training for women. On the other hand, the community development agency initially had adopted a counter strategy to working with DHS on behalf of the recipients and placing recipients in services they identified as more appropriate. Further differences are seen between the two outside agencies with the legal aid attorney working the system for individual women while the organizing agency focused on women's empowerment with a goal of self advocacy.

All seem to be working around the limitations of welfare policy to help clients but justifications and actions used differ, highlighting power issues. How is power constructed by the advocates, whose power is most important and who should be advocating for women's educational rights? We must also ask if the creation of short term programs really help women prepare for living wage work and how vocational programs might advocate more strongly for women. Is the community development agency empowering women or taking power away from them? While two of the agencies see women as unable to advocate for themselves all three welfare mothers told of ways in which they do so.

Education for low skill welfare recipients is a complex matter given the range of stakeholders involved with providing services. This project suggests some areas of conflict in how women receive services and advocacy support. What are the ramifications of practitioners advocating for welfare recipients when their interests are contradictory or divergent? How do different interests put providers at odds with each other and weaken services? What things are providers doing that, in fact, are not making a difference for low skill welfare mothers? This is just a sample of questions that emerge from the findings for further investigation.

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